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AUTHOR Frazier, Billie H.
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ABSTRACT

This document contains a brief bibliography of peer-reviewed literature, with abstracts, on humor in later life. It is one of 12 bibliographies on aging prepared by the National Agricultural Library for its "Pathfinders" series of publications. Topics covered by the other 11 bibliographies include aging parents, adult children, dementia and Alzheimer's disease in the elderly (written for educators), dementia and Alzheimer's disease in the elderly (written for consumers), family caregiving, family support networks, grandparenting, intergenerational relationships, living arrangements in later life, pets and the elderly, and sibling relationships in adulthood. This bibliography on humor in later life contains citations for 18 books and articles for researchers and educators and consumers. It concludes with a list of organizations that readers may contact for further assistance. (NB)

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MARCH 1990

HUMOR IN LATER LIFE

PREPARED BY BILLIE H. FRAZIER, Ph.D., CFLE**

This PATHFINDER has been prepared to provide educators and consumers with an understanding of some special aspects of humor related to aging and later life.

EDUCATOR/CONSUMER

"Age Differences in Humor Comprehension and Appreciation in Old Age," Aron H. Schaier and Victor G. Cicirelli. Journal of Gerontology, 31(5):577-582, September 1976.

This article describes a study which extends the psychological investigation of humor to the elderly. Subjects between age 50 and 70 are tested on their appreciation and comprehension of 12 conservation and 12 nonconservation jokes. Results indicate that appreciation increases with age and comprehension decreases with age for both kinds of jokes. The older subjects tend to understand the jokes less well, but think they are funnier. The appreciation of a joke depends on a match between an individual's ability level and the cognitive demand of the joke.

"Attitudes Toward Aging Portrayed By Birthday Cards," Kathleen M. Dillon and Barbara Spiess Jones. International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 13(1):79-84, 1981.

In this article, contemporary attitudes toward the aged are inferred from an analysis of birthday greeting cards which are divided into six thematic categories. Overall, the attitudes appear to be negative, supporting previous studies that analyzed attitudes toward the aged found in joke anthologies. The question raised is whether this kind of humor is being used defensively to counteract age anxiety by exaggerating age-related deficits to create a psychological distance, or whether, in fact, it reflects a healthy adaptation to a difficult truth.

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This PATHFINDER lists significant resources that are judged to be accurate, readable and available. Opinions expressed in the publication do not reflect views of the United States Department of Agriculture.

"Attitudes Toward Old Age and Aging as Shown by Humor," Leland J. Davies. The Gerontologist, 17(3)220-225, 1977.

This study of attitudes toward aging, old age, and death reveals negative attitudes to specific subjects in general and toward women in particular. This article discusses concepts of humor and the need for intervention at the personal and organizational levels to eradicate negative stereotype of aging. It is essential to stress positive aspects of humor about aging and old age.

"The Caring Role of the Nurse in the Application of Humor Therapy to the Patient Experiencing Helplessness," Wendy Chusid Raber. Clinical Gerontologist, 7(1):3-11, Fall 1987.

This paper examines humor therapy as a nursing modality for patients experiencing helplessness. The author believes that while humor is unconsciously used widely in nursing, it is important to focus attention to the conscious therapeutic use of humor. This will inject some levity into illness and hospitalization, which is often overwhelmingly serious with inescapable drama for both patients and staff.

"The Foolishness and Wisdom of Age: Attitudes Toward the Elderly as Reflected in Jokes," Joseph Richman. Gerontologist, 17(3):210-219, June 1977.

One hundred jokes about the aged were compared with 160 jokes about children. Data indicate that jokes convey a negative attitude toward the elderly and the next generation. Old age is presented in an ambivalent manner. In contrast, jokes present a positive attitude toward children.

Humor and Aging, Lucille Nahemow, Kathleen A. McCluskey-Fawcett, and Paul E. McGhee. Orlando, FL: Academic Press, Inc., 1986.

This book presents a comprehensive study of humor and aging. An underlying idea is that humor is important in facing life and coping with aging. The authors divide the book into the following sections: theory, perspectives, death and dying, and brief empirical studies of humor across the life span.

"Humor and the Alzheimer's Patient: The Psychological Basis," Janette P. Adasiak. The American Journal of Alzheimer's Care and Related Disorders & Research, July-August 1989, 18-21.

Persons suffering from Alzheimer's disease still have some capacity to appreciate and respond to humor. This article shows that humor can have positive behavioral conditioning effects as a by-product, and that an understanding of normal cognitive development across the life span is useful in selecting humor that will be effective with impaired clients. The author observed various uses of humor by the staff of an adult day care center and offers suggestions for caregivers based on these observations.

"Humor and Healing: Therapeutic Effects in Geriatrics," Heather Williams. Gerontion, 1(3):14-17, May-June 1986.

The author discusses the theoretical base of humor, humor and physiological effects, humor and psychological effects, humor in communication, and implications for caregivers. The author suggests that humor is beneficial to healing, and that professionals need to use its attributes in a therapeutic way. Caregivers and patients can benefit from a continuing exploration of definitions, theories, interventions, and the evaluation of humor as a therapeutic tool for healing in a humanistic way.

"Humor and Health," Jean Langley Sullivan and Donna M. Deane. Journal of Gerontological Nursing, 14(1):20-24, 1988.

The authors provide three key points. Since institutionalized elders both exhibit and benefit from humor, healthcare professionals can facilitate humor experiences for the elderly. Annotated observations of humor initiated and experienced by the elderly provide structure for analyzing and facilitating humor interventions. Observations are categorized according to Raskin's humor themes: cognitive-perceptual, social-behavioral, and psychoanalytical. Using humor as a planned nursing intervention requires the nurse to develop a personal sense of humor as well as recognize the appropriate strategies for facilitating humor in others.

"Humor and the Older Adult: Implications for Nursing", Jolene M. Simon. Journal of Advanced Nursing, 13:441-446, 1988.

This correlational descriptive study examines the relationship between the uses of humor and health outcomes as measured by perceived health, life satisfaction, and morale in older adults. The findings reveal significant positive relationships between situational humor and perceived health, and situational humor and morale. Furthermore, there was a significant negative relationship between coping humor and perceived health. These findings suggest that humor may be one phenomenon which influences the older person's perception of perceived health, life satisfaction and morale. It may assist in successful aging. These preliminary findings support the need for further research with a larger sample.

"Humor: Assessment and Intervention", Jean P. Ruxton, and Maureen P. Hester. International Journal of Aging and Human Development, 25(1):13-21, 1987.

This paper describes a research project which assesses humor and suggests strategies for adding humor to work, home, and interpersonal relationships. It addresses the value involved for clinicians and their clients.

Humor: The Tonic You Can Afford: A Handbook on Ways of Using Humor in Long Term Care, Maxine Ewers, et al. Los Angeles, CA: Ethel Percy Andrus Gerontology Center, University of Southern California, 1983.

This is a compilation of ideas and guidelines that was developed by volunteers in a demonstration project, "Life Enrichment Through Humor In Long Term Care Facilities". The booklet was developed for persons who work with older adults who can no longer maintain their independence. Despite limitations, promoting or rediscovering a sense of humor can generate a renewed enjoyment of the later years.

Older and Wiser: Wit, Wisdom, and Spirited Advice from the Older Generation, Eric W. Johnson. New York, NY: Walker and Company, 1986.

The main purpose of this practical book is to share bits and larger pieces of wit and wisdom of elders on what "old" means; on intelligence, health, doctors, nurses, families, friends, and neighbors; on where to live, how to work and retire; on sexuality, religion, dying, death--and mainly, life. The ideas, the humorous stories, practical suggestions, occasional verses, and gemlike bits will amuse and enlighten anyone of any age. To the younger generation, it will provide some boons, a few warnings, and some advice, tactful and not so tactful.

"Response to Cartoons and Attitudes Toward Aging," Alice Sheppard. Journal of Gerontology, 36(1):122-126, 1981.

This study examines the relationship between responses to cartoons and attitudes toward aging among college-aged students. Four categories of cartoons on aging are identified: disparagement, ineffectuality, obsolescence, and isolation. No significant relationships are found between attitudes and humor appreciation.

"Selected Aspects of Humorous Interaction among Elderly Participants and Staff Caregivers in Community Based Health Support Programs of The Adult Day Care Type," Georgia Linton Stevens. Dissertation Abstracts International, 47(09):3708-B, March 1987.

This study explores the daily humorous interaction of the elderly and staff in adult day care. The comic aspects of humorous interaction, functions served, intent of participants, and significance to the participants are analyzed. Humor seems to enhance the personal and interpersonal interactions.

"Thalia Meets Tithonus: Gerontological Wit and Humor in Literature," D.G. Kehl. The Gerontologist, 25(5):539-544, October 1985.

The author identifies nine forms of gerontological humor in literature from classical times to the present. Each form involves some type of incongruity: the foibles of age, expressions of what it means to grow old, relativity of age, physical and mental decline, social relationships, youth and age, black humor, and the shattering of old age stereotypes. The ability to laugh at foibles and limitations enables one to survive and prevail.

"The Therapeutic Value of Humor in Aging Adults," Jolene M. Simon, Journal of Gerontological Nursing, 14(8):8-13, August 1988.

The article discusses humor in the older adult and methods for incorporating humor into nursing practice with older adults. It suggests that humor is an appropriate strategy to promote with older adults in both community and long-term settings and that nurses need to consider humor as a communication tool to reduce tension and break barriers. Humor and laughter are also valuable in physical health, specifically in relation to the prevention of heart disease and other stress-related conditions.

"When You Care Enough: An Analysis of Attitudes Toward Aging in Humorous Birthday Cards," Vasilikie Demos and Ann Jache. The Gerontologist, 21(2), 1981.

Authors analyze 195 age-related, humorous birthday card messages and find that aging is portrayed more negatively than positively. Substantive analyses reveal that most of the cards focus upon themes having to do with physical and mental characteristics, age concealment, age boundaries, and aging as a process sui generis.

C O N T A C T F O R A S S I S T A N C E

County Cooperative Extension Service (under county government in telephone directory)

Departments of colleges of family science, psychology, education, human ecology, home economics or aging at a state college or university

Local library

This PATHFINDER resulted from the author's research at the National Agricultural Library while on sabbatical leave from the University of Maryland during the summer and fall of 1989. Using database searches of AGRICOLA, Psycinfo, Social Scisearch, ERIC, Family Resources, Dissertation Abstracts International, and Ageline, relevant references were reviewed and annotated. It is authored by:

** Billie H. Frazier, Ph.D., Certified Family Life Educator, Associate Professor, Human Development Specialist, The University of Maryland Cooperative Extension Service, College Park, Maryland

Reviewer: Edward F Ansello, Director, Virginia Center on Aging, Richmond, Virginia

Technical Support: Kathleen C. Hayes and Sandra L. Facinoli, Technical Information Specialists, National Agricultural Library, United States Department of Agriculture

For questions or comments: Contact Billie H. Frazier, Room 2309 Computer and Space Sciences Building, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742-2451, Telephone: (301) 454-3602.

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